

The Real Presence



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The teaching of the Catholic Church concerning the Holy Eucharist is that by the words of consecration the substance of the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, who is thereafter "truly, really, and substantially" present under these appearances.

The Body and Blood of Christ are present *truly*, and not in any merely figurative or metaphorical sense. They are *really* present; it is not that we partake of mere food, however loaded with blessings from on high, and in the partaking apprehend Christ, in some sort, by Faith. They are *substantially* present, that is to say, it is not merely the power of virtue of Christ that is present in these material things; there is no substance of bread and wine at all; in its place, under the appearances of bread and wine, are present the very Body and Blood of Our Lord.

These three adverbs, therefore, used by the Council of Trent, deny three mistaken explanations advanced by heretics about the Real Presence.

The Catholic doctrine falls under three heads -

- The Body and Blood of Christ are truly present in the Holy Eucharist.
- After the consecration there remains no substance of bread or wine.
- The way in which this comes about is by the change of the substance of bread and wine into the substance of Christ's Body and Blood. This change is called *Transubstantiation*.

The plan of this document is first to prove the fact of the Real Presence, taking together the first two heads of doctrine, since they are complementary; and secondly, to establish the way in which the Real Presence is brought about.

A - The Fact

Scripture tells us three things about the Holy Eucharist: the promise of it, the fulfillment of the promise in its institution, and the belief concerning it of the Apostolic Church.

I - The Promise (John 6:26ff)

(It should be noted that the Church has never defined that the discourse of Our Lord in John 6 concerns the Holy Eucharist. Nevertheless, this is the unanimous opinions of theologians and beyond reasonable doubt.)

At the opening of his sixth chapter, Saint John describes the feeding of the five thousand with five loaves and two fish (6:1-15), and the walking of Christ upon the waters by night (6:16-22). The rest of the chapter gives His discourse in the synagogue at Capharnaum on the Bread of Life. This discourse falls into two parts, the division occurring at 6:48, or, according to other scholars, at 6:51. About the meaning of the first part Catholic scholars are not agreed. Some hold that it refers to the Holy Eucharist, others that Our Lord is speaking only of Faith in Himself as the means to obtain this heavenly food. All agree that at least from 6:51 onwards, He is speaking of the Holy Eucharist.

John 6:51-59 - Looking then at this second portion, we find that Our Lord's words are,

"I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world... Amen, amen, I say unto you: except you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you shall not have life in you. He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed; and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood abideth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me and I live by the Father, so he that eateth me, the same also shall live by me. This the bread that came down from heaven. Not as your fathers did eat manna and are dead. He that eateth this bread shall live for ever."

Reality or Metaphor?

In seven verses Our Lord repeats seven times that He Himself, His Flesh and His Blood, are to be eaten and drunk. Did He mean this literally, or was He speaking metaphor?

From the tone of His speech we should certainly gather that he meant His words to be taken literally. He uses the formula of solemn assertion, "Amen" signifying "in very truth." He repeats His statement many times, not negatively, now positively. He declares that His Flesh is "meat indeed and His Blood drink indeed." He appeals to His own union with His Father,

As the living Father hath sent me and I live by the Father, so he that eateth me, the same also shall live by me.

Further, His hearers understood Him literary. They asked, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" And Our Lord, so

far from undecieving them, insists on the truth of what He has said. Many even of His disciples found it "a hard saying" and "walked no more with Him." Yet, rather than abate in the least the force of His words, He let them go. Is this the conduct we should expect of Christ, even from the merely human point of view, if He had been speaking only in parables? Certainly it is inconsistent with His practice as recorded elsewhere in the Gospels.

We find repeatedly that whenever His symbolical phrases were understood literally, He was at pains to correct the mistake. Thus, when Nicodemus understood literally His saying that "unless a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God," He took care to explain that the new birth was to be "of water and the Holy Ghost" (John 3:3ff). On the other hand, when His words were intended literally, and by mistake were taken metaphorically, He insisted, as in the passage before us, on His original statement. An example may be found in Matthew 9:2ff where the Pharisees charged Him with blasphemy for saying to the paralytic,

"Thy sins are forgiven thee."

"Whether is easier to say, 'Thy sins are forgiven thee', or to say 'Take up thy bed and walk'? But that you may know that Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then said he to the man sick of the palsy): Arise, take up thy bed and go into thy house." (John 4:32, 8:32, 11:11; Matthew 16:6)

This point is confirmed by the fact that even in this discourse (according to one, at least probably, interpretation of a difficult passage) He tries to correct a misapprehension of His hearers. They took Him so literally that they seem to have thought He meant some kind of revolting, cannibalistic eating. It is against this interpretation that, whilst still

maintain the truth of His assertion, He says, "Doth this scandalize you? If then you shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before? If is the spirit that quickeneth, the flesh profiteth nothing. The worlds that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (6:62-64). He appeals, in fact, to His divine power over material things which He has so recently used before some of them, and which He can use again to overcome what revolts them.

Metaphor Impossible in the Context

There can be no doubt, therefore, that the audience at Caphernaum did, in fact, understand His words literally, and that He meant them so to be understood. Indeed, He must have done so. Not that the phrase "to eat the flesh and drink the blood" of another is incapable, in the language used by Our Lord, of bearing a metaphorical meaning. One, and only one, such meaning it can bear. But that one meaning makes nonsense of the whole discourse. For metaphorically the phrase means to pursue with the utmost hatred, or to inflict upon another a grievous injury, e.g.,

Whilst the wicked draw near against me, to eat my flesh -
Psalms 26:2

Why do you persecute me as god, and glut yourselves with my flesh - *Job 19:22*

And I will feed thy enemies with their own flesh, and they shall be made drunk with their own blood, as with new wine.
- *Isaias 49: 26*

From this we may judge the value of the common objection that Our Lord was an Eastern speaking to Easterns, and therefore, apparently, in a language charged with vagueness and poetical imagery. The only image conveyed to an Eastern by this phrase would be one of horror, and one

which, as has been said, makes nonsense of the entire passage.

He Cannot Have Meant Faith

This, too, is another refutation of the common Protestant view that Our Lord is here speaking only of Faith in Himself. The phrase could convey no such meaning.

But does not Our Lord Himself say that "the flesh profits nothing," and that "it is the spirit that quickens?" Can He then have meant His previous words to be taken literally? Is He not rather offering here a figurative explanation?

Undoubtedly the two verses, 63 and 64, are in many ways difficult. But this is certain, that they are not a figurative explanation of what has gone before. Hitherto Our Lord has always spoken of "My Flesh" and "My Blood." Here He speaks of "the flesh," and contrasts it with "the spirit." Now this metaphorical contrast is common in Hebrew, as in other tongues, to distinguish a natural element from one that is supernatural. One instance from Scripture will occur instantly to the mind, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). Again, we have the words to Nicodemus, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit (John 3:6). It is request also in the Epistles of Saint Paul. But, further if we are to refer the words to the preceding passage, it works havoc with the theory that by His Flesh Our Lord meant Faith. For He is thus made to say that Faith profits nothing.

II - The Fulfillment

We have four accounts of the Institutions of the Holy Eucharist, given respectively by Saint Matthew, Saint Mark, Saint Luke and Saint Paul. Compare -

Matthew 26:26-28 - And whilst they were at supper Jesus took bread and blessed and broke and gave to His disciples and said, Take ye and eat. This is my body. And taking the chalice he gave thanks and gave to them, saying, Drink ye all of this. For this is my blood of the new testament, which shall be shed for many unto the remission of sins.

Mark 14:22-24 - And whilst they were eating Jesus took bread, and blessing, broke and gave to them and said, Take ye. This is my body. And having taken the chalice, giving thanks, he gave it to them and they all drank of it. And he said to them, This is my blood of the new testament, which shall be shed for many.

Luke 22:19-20 - And taking bread, He gave thanks and brake and gave to them saying, This is my body, which is given for you. Do this for a commemoration of me. In like manner the chalice also after he had supped saying, This is the chalice, the new testament in my blood, which shall be shed for you.

1st Corinthians 11:23-25 - The Lord Jesus, the same night in which he was betrayed, took bread, and giving thanks, broke and said, Take ye and eat. This is my body, which shall be delivered to you for the commemoration of me. In like manner, also the chalice after he had supped, saying, This chalice is the new testament in my blood. This do ye, as often as you shall drink, for the commemoration of me.

It is at once clear that the accounts fall into two pairs. Matthew and Mark closely resemble each other, as also do Luke and Paul. It is equally clear that in substance the account by all four writers is the same. As regards the bread, the words of institution are identical in all the narratives. As regards the chalice, the indirect form used by Luke and Paul does not differ in meaning from the direct form used by Matthew and Mark. Luke, in fact, adds that the chalice (in

the Greek the nominative case of the participle makes it plain that the shedding is connected with the chalice) shall be shed. But a chalice cannot be shed; only its contents can be shed; and certainly wine was not shed for us. Therefore, in speaking of "the chalice, the new testament in my blood," the writer must have meant the blood in the chalice. The metaphor, technically called *metonymy*, is an obvious and old-established one.

Our task, then, is to inquire into the meaning of the words, "This is my body" and "This is my blood of the new testament," or, equivalently, "This chalice is the new testament in my blood."

The very clearness of the words is, in some degree, a difficulty in the way of inquiry. One does not inquire into the obvious. Yet, assuredly, if a man wished to state the doctrine of the Real Presence, he could not use language plainer than this. If, on the other hand, he wished to state a doctrine about symbolical or figurative presence, words such as these would be singularly misleading. There are, doubtless, many things which are acknowledged to be capable of a symbolical meaning, either from their own nature or from the idiom of a language, or from the context in which they occur. Thus a picture is of its nature a symbol; in ordinary language we speak of a brave man as a "lion"; and thirdly, though a fond mother may pardonably call her child her "angel," no one who knows the child is in danger of being mistaken about the fact.

These are metaphors and types familiar to all, and there is no fear of error in their use. But bread and wine are not found among these types as symbols of the human body and blood, nor did they convey that meaning to the people of Palestine in the time of Our Lord.

No True Metaphorical Parallels from Scripture

It is commonly said, indeed, that parallel phrases, metaphorical in meaning, are to be met with frequently in Scripture. We are referred to Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream, "The seven lean kine are seven lean years," etc., and to Our Lord's own words about Himself, "I am the door;" "I am the vine." But on examination they prove to be no true parallels. Form and context sufficiently show that. Joseph is expressly interpreting a dream picture. Our Lord does not say, "This door," or, "This vine is my body," or, "my blood." But, even apart from this, the very object of a metaphor is to explain by means of a picture. Now, if we take the words, "This is my body" as a metaphor, they explain nothing. There is no conventional picture according to which bread and wine stand for union with another person by Faith. So far from explaining, metaphorically considered they make more difficulties.

Looking now more closely at the words, their emphasis is all in favour of a literal interpretation. Fully rendered in English they are as follows - "This is my body, the (body) given for you; my blood, the (blood) of the new testament, the (blood) shed for many." Literal interpretation gives an exact correspondence with the prediction in John 6:52, "The bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world."

A True Scriptural Parallel

Moreover, to the literal interpretation there is a true and most apposite parallel passage in Exodus 24:8 where Moses sprinkles the blood of the sacrifice on the people saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord hath made with you." Saint Paul quotes this as, "This is the blood of the testament which God hath enjoined unto you" (Hebrews 9:20), pointing to it as a figure of the shedding of Christ's

Blood on Calvary. But the most striking point for the present argument is this, that in both the Hebrew and Greek versions of the Old Testament, the phrase where translated "This is," should be rendered literally "Behold." "This is the blood" = "Behold the blood." So Moses, and Our Lord, fulfilling, according to Saint Paul, the figure, says, "This is my body; this is my blood."

The words, then, are themselves so far from conveying a metaphor that, had Christ meant them to be understood figuratively, He must in fairness have given clear tokens of His intention. The need for this becomes more evident when we recall the state of mind of His hearers. For three years the Apostles had witnessed His miraculous power over disease, the forces of nature, and even the evil spirits. They had been privileged to share that power. "The devils also," they said, "are subject to us in Thy name." They had come to set implicit faith upon His word, and He had encouraged them and even insisted on their doing so. At the time of the promise of the Eucharist they had clung in faith to Christ's word when many of His disciples fell away by reason of the "hard saying." How could He expect them to receive His words in any but their most literal sense unless He warned them against it? Yet He said never a word of warning. Is it credible that He, to whose sublime character even the unbeliever bears witness, traded upon the simplicity of His followers, and, through them, of the faithful for twelve hundred years in regard of the solemn seal which He declared Himself to be setting on this His last will and testament, the New Dispensation of God to man?

Objections

Two or three common objections remain to be considered. First, Christ admittedly used a metaphor in speaking of the chalice of His Blood. But if one metaphor be admitted, how

can it be said that He must have meant His words to be taken literally? For the sufficient reason that the metaphor of the chalice is unmistakable, whereas, if the whole passage is figurative, it was apt to produce, and did in fact produce, a most grievous mistake.

Secondly, it is objected that even after the consecration the Holy Eucharist is called bread and "the fruit of the vine." But the fact that the appearances of bread and wine remain is enough to account for this.

Thirdly, it is urged that "is" must here by equivalent to "represents," as in passages of the Old Testament. To this the reply is that, even where "represents" might be substituted for "is," the passages are never true parallels. A further point in the objection is the claim that the Syro-Chaldaic dialect, probably spoken by Our Lord, contains no word corresponding to the English "represent." Poverty of language, therefore, compelled Him to use "is." There are two answers, one, that in fact there are forty words meaning to "represent"; the other, that the early writers of the Syrian Church adopt the literal meaning. "Christ did not call it [His Body] a type of figure," writes Saint Maruthas of Tangrita (c.350), "but said, 'This is my body and this is my blood.'"

III - The Witness of Saint Paul

For the faith of the Apostolic Church we have the evidence of Saint Paul. Immediately after his account of the institution of the Holy Eucharist, he proceeds to draw from it conclusions which exclude all doubt of his belief in the Real Presence. These are his words -

For as often as you shall eat this bread and drink the chalice, you shall show the death of the Lord, until he come. Therefore, whosoever shall eat this bread and

drink the chalice of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and of the blood of the Lord. But let a man prove himself; and so let him eat of that bread and drink of the chalice. For he that eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks judgement to himself, not discerning the body of the Lord. - *1st Corinthians 11:26-29*

Note, first, that the bread and chalice here spoken of are those which Christ has just declared to be His Body and His Blood, and that Saint Paul marks them off as special terms by calling them "this bread" and "the chalice of the Lord."

Next, this eating and drinking is evidently something solemn, since a man is to "prove himself," to examine if he be worthy, before partaking, and the solemnity is due to the nature of the food eaten.

Thirdly, the unworthy partaker commits a special crime. He is "guilty of the body and blood of the Lord." Only the doctrine of the Real Presence can justify this language. On any symbolical theory it is sheer abuse of words. A friend, let us suppose, invites me to dine with him. That is a sign of union. If while I break bread with him, as the phrase goes, and eat his salt, I am privately plotting his ruin, I am, indeed, a black traitor; but no one can accuse me of being guilty of his body and blood. When we remember, further, the plain words of institution, which immediately precede this solemn warning, it is evident that one doctrine alone fits the facts, the doctrine of the Real Presence.

All this is immediately confirmed by the sentence of damnation pronounced against the unworthy man. He "eats and drinks judgement to himself, not discerning the body of the Lord"; in other words, because he presumed to treat as common bread what was in fact the Body of Christ.

Another Passage

Equally explicit is the statement in the previous chapter,

Judge ye yourselves what I say. The chalice of benediction which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? And the bread which we break, is it not the partaking of the body of the Lord? For we, being many, are one bread, one body: all that partake of one bread." *1st Corinthians 10:15-17*)

The plain doctrine Saint Paul evidently expects to pass unquestioned. But, moreover, that must be a special bread which unites all that partake of it in one body, and, taken in connection with the teaching of Saint Paul on the Mystical Body of Christ, according to which every Christian, in virtue of his union with Christ, is a member of His Body, it is natural to see in this special bread the visible sign of union. But what explanation so well fits this doctrine as that the bread is no longer mere bread but the Body of the Lord?

IV - The Early Christian Church

Space forbids quotation in detail from the Fathers of the Church, and, indeed, the evidence is so abundant that quotation on any but a large scale could only prove unsatisfactory. It must suffice to state in general that the Fathers, Eastern and Western, are practically unanimous in teaching the Real Presence. Their language is at times loose and untechnical, and could not be used today, when, largely under the stress of heresy, the doctrine has come to be stated with scientific precision, but of their true mind on the subject there can be no reasonable doubt. The exceptions are so few and unimportant as to be negligible in a chain of evidence extending over seven centuries.

Besides the Fathers, and guiding us in interpreting them, we have the recorded practice of the Christian Church. From very early times it was the custom to receive Holy Communion fasting. In administering the Host the celebrant said, "The Body of the Lord," and the communicant answered, "Amen." He then received the Host into his hands and put it into his mouth. The deacon presented the chalice, saying, "The Blood of the Lord," and the communicant drank from it after again replying, "Amen." The greatest care was enjoined upon communicants to let none of the sacred species fall to the ground, because it was the Body of the Lord. Under the species of bread the Holy Eucharist was regularly carried to the sick and to prisoners by deacons or, if persecution made that course too dangerous, even by children. It was thus that saint Tarcisius met martyrdom. "He preferred to yield his soul in death," says the epitaph inscribed by Pope Saint Damasus on his tomb, "than to betray the heavenly members [of Christ] to raving dogs." In time of persecution, too, the faithful took the Holy Eucharist to their homes that they might communicate in case of need. Hermits, living alone in the desert, regularly reserved it. All this points to a belief in a real and permanent Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist.

Discipline of the Secret

Something may also be gathered from the "Discipline of the Secret," that is, the practice of not mentioning the sacred mysteries of Christianity in public sermons and writings, but of veiling them under some general phrase which the initiated understood, but which would convey nothing to the outsider. Why this secrecy should have been observed if the Holy Eucharist was no more than a symbol, it is hard to see. On the other hand, the fact that Christians were commonly accused of holding a cannibal feast and eating the bodies of children is sufficient to account for the Discipline of the

Secret, and is moreover itself best explained as a perversion of the doctrine of the Real Presence.

B - Transubstantiation

The Church not only defines the fact of the Real Presence; she defines also the way in which that Presence is brought about.

"Since Christ our Redeemer," says the Council of Trent, "said that what He offered under the appearance of bread was truly His Body, therefore it has always been held in the Church of God, and this Holy Synod now declares it anew, that by the consecration of bread and wine there takes place a change of the entire substance of bread into the substance of the Body of Christ our Lord, and of the entire substance of wine into the substance of His Blood. This change is by the Holy Catholic Church aptly and accurately termed Transubstantiation." (Session 13, Chapter 4)

There is a common misapprehension among non-Catholics that transubstantiation is a doctrine devised in the Middle Ages and thrust upon a credulous body of subjects by a tyrannical Church. In actual fact, from the first the Church has taught, in accordance with the plain meaning of Our Lord's words, that the bread and wine are changed by the words of consecration into the Body and Blood of Christ. For He did not say, "Here is My Body" or "This contains My Body," but "This is My Body," and "This is My Blood."

Thus Saint Ignatius of Antioch, who died a martyr in 107 writes that heretics "abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they do not confess the eucharist to be the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins." (Ad. Smyrn. 7)

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem (died in 386) concludes his instruction on the Holy Eucharist with these words - "Filled with the faith that what appears bread is not bread, even though it seems so to the taste, but the Body of Christ; and what appears wine it not wine, even though taste would have it so, but the Blood of Christ" (Cathech. Myst. 4:9)

Saint Ambrose (died in 397) says, "Of the works of the whole world thou has read: He spoke and they were made. Cannot, then, the word of Christ which was able to make out of nothing that which was not, change the things which are into that which they were not?"

The Notion of "Change" Universal in the Fathers

In general, the Fathers employ every possible word for "change" to express the effect of consecration. They say that the bread and wine "are made," "become," "are changed into," "pass into," "are trans-elemented into" the Body and Blood of Christ. If language means anything, these terms mean that what was bread is, after consecration, no longer bread but Christ's Body. For, had the Fathers wished to say that the Body of Christ was united with, or contained in, the bread, what could have been easier? Yet they persistently apply the notion of change, a notion which involves the transition of one thing into another.

But why, it may be asked, introduce this new term Transubstantiation and discountenance all other? There are two reasons.

First, this change is unique. It has no parallel. It is not like a change of colour, as when dark hair turns gray; nor is it like the change observable in age, when a full body shrinks and grows bent. In neither case does the substance change. Nor even is it like the miraculous change of water into wine at

Cana. For in the Holy Eucharist a non-living substance is changed into a living one, an ordinary piece of bread into a substance which is totally different yet is not now newly produced but already existing, i.e., Christ's own Body. A unique event demands a special name. Transubstantiation is the appropriate name, since it means literally the crossing or changing of substances, just as to transport means to bear across, and to transmit means to send across.

Secondly, the term is a test of orthodoxy. Were a variety of terms allowed, expressions might be used about the Holy Eucharist which, without explicitly denying the true doctrine, would be open to heretical interpretation. The Anglican school of Modern Churchmen afford an example of how far men will go in reading their private views into dogmatic formulae. Transubstantiation is a decisive test of true belief about the Real Presence. This, too, is the history of its introduction. It was adopted under the necessity of pinning down Berengarius, Wickliff, and Huss to a precise statement of their meaning. This was in the twelfth century.

Not A New Term

But there are traces of its use in the eleventh century, so that even when first officially employed by the Church, some seven hundred years ago, it could hardly be called new, whilst the acquiescence with which it was received shows that the truth it expressed was the established belief of the faithful.

Such is the doctrine of transubstantiation, accepted without question for twelve hundred years, accepted still by the greater part of Christendom. It is an act beyond created power to perform, and beyond created mind to comprehend. But it is one thing to say that we cannot understand how it is done, and quite another to conclude that, therefore, it is

impossible. We can say that it is an exception to all human experience, but we cannot show that it is contrary to reason. Appearances naturally imply a substance to which they belong; but there is no proof that supernaturally they cannot be kept in being apart from substance.

Nor can it be said that if so our senses deceive us. Our senses report the form, colour, taste, smell which we have learned to associate with the presence of bread and wine, and their report is true. All these qualities are there. It is from another source, namely, the authority of Jesus Christ, that we learn that in this case the appearance are connected not with bread and wine, but with His Body and Blood.

Again, naturally we are acquainted with substances only as "extended," i.e., as consisting of parts united in a whole, as possessing a certain size and shape. We cannot imagine how a human body can be present in even the smallest particle of bread or in a drop of wine. But we must remember that we do not know what substance is in itself. The most we can say is that we have never had experience of it except as extended. That a body should exist in a manner comparable to the manner of our soul's existence in our body, conscious in every part of the body, yet not thereby divided, does not fall within natural experience; but we cannot there dismiss it as inconceivable. The words of Cardinal Newman remain true - "What do I know of substance or matter? Just as much as the greatest philosophers; and that is nothing at all." (Apologia) Ignorance, and consequent readiness to accept the assurance of a higher authority, is the only reasonable attitude. And we have for Catholic truth the highest of all authority,

What God's own Son hath spoken is my creed;
No truer word than His, who is the Truth indeed.

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